U.S. PATENT APPLICATION

FOR

SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER PROGRAM PRODUCT FOR REGISTERING AN UNREGISTERED VENDOR/PRODUCT IN A BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS NETWORK-BASED FRAMEWORK

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SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER PROGRAM PRODUCT FOR REGISTERING AN UNREGISTERED VENDOR/PRODUCT IN A BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS NETWORK-BASED FRAMEWORK

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present application is a continuation-in-part of an application filed August 15, 2000 under serial number 09/639,388, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to e-commerce, and more particularly to business-to-business frameworks implemented utilizing the Internet.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The Internet has provided a relatively new medium on which many business-related services can now be offered. In the past, many businesses relied upon mobile storage devices, i.e. compact discs, floppy discs, etc., for disseminating information for various purposes. With the inception of wide use of the Internet, information may not only be disseminated in real-time, but also updated instantly. This environment has allowed many business-to-business related services to be offered on a grand scale.

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Figure 1 illustrates a framework **100** associated with one business-to-business model which is used to provide a public forum for merchants **102**, or retailers, attempting to locate vendors **104**, or manufacturers, for the purpose of placing and fulfilling orders. In use, the merchants **102** may browse various product

lines **106** of products **108** offered by the vendors **104**. To facilitate such searching, the product lines **106** of products **108** may be organized into categories **110** and sub-categories **112**. For example, a vendor **104** may have a woodworking product line **106** including a Christmas nutcracker product **108** which may be found by searching

5 under a houseware category **110** and an ornament sub-category **112**.

Upon finding the desired product **108**, inquiries and purchase orders **114** may be submitted from the merchants **102** to the vendors **104** for the purpose of reselling to customers. In exchange for the above services provided by the foregoin g

10 business-to-business framework **100**, a fee is charged to the vendors **104** based on the value of the purchases. Such fee often comes in the form of a percentage of the fulfilled purchase order.

One problem that arises in the context of the framework **100** is due to the fact

15 that the merchants **102** cannot always find a desired vendor **104** or product **108** when using the system. This is a result of the vendor **104** not registering with the framework **100**, or a registered vendor **104** not properly registering a partic ular product **108**. Often, this lack of registration is caused by the fee requirement associated with the use of the framework **100**.

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There is therefore a need for a computer implemented business method for registering unregistered vendors and/or products in a network-based business- to-business framework.

DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

A system, method and computer program product are provided for

5 registering an unregistered vendor in a network-based framework. Initially, at least

one order is received from a first user utilizing a network. Such order is directed to a

second user that is not registered with the network-based framework. Thereafter,

contact information of the second user is retrieved. A request is then transmitted to

the second user using the contact information. Such request is for the second user to

10 register with the network-based framework.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the first user may be a merchant

and the second user may be a vendor. Further, the network may b e the Internet. As

an option, the first user may be allowed to complete a blank purchase order. Such

15 purchase order may thus include the contact information used to send the request.

In another embodiment, a notification relating to the order may be se nt. In

particular, the notification may be sent if the second user fails to register.

Optionally, the second user may be charged a fee based on the order. Further, the

20 first user may be paid a rebate based on the order.

In another aspect of the present invention, a technique may be provided for

registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework. Initially,

at least one order for goods or services may be received from a first user utilizing a

25 network. In the present embodiment, the goods or services are ordered from a

second user, and are not registered with the network-based framework.

Thereafter, the second user is notified of the order utilizing the network.

Further, the second user is permitted to display information on the goods or

services using the network-based framework in response to the notification.

As an option, other users may be allowed to access information relating to the second user via the network. Such information is provided by the second user during the course of use of the various embodiments of the present invention, and may include contact information and/or information relating to goods or services offered by the second user.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the registration may include storing information relating to the second user in a database of the network-based framework. In use, such information in the database may be synchronized with information on a computing device which is connected to the database via the Internet.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5   Figure **1** illustrates a framework associated with one business -to-business model which is used to provide a public forum for merchants attempting to locate vendors for the purpose of placing and fulfilling orders;

Figure **2** illustrates a method for providing a rebate in a business-to-business

10   network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure **3** shows a representative hardware environment in which the foregoing method of Figure **2** may be carried out;

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Figure **4** is a detailed flow diagram showing the various features of one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure **5** shows an exemplary graphical user interface for displaying a current

20   rebate rate, a current rebate amount, and the required money to be spent before receiving an incremental increase in the rebate rate based on a graduated scale, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

Figure **6** illustrates an exemplary graphical user interface that conveys

25   information regarding the status of purchase orders and rebates;

Figure **7** illustrates an exemplary graphical user interface explaining the various aspects of the rebate feature of the present invention;

Figure **8** illustrates a method for allowing a merchant to purchase goods and/or services from a vendor who is not registered in the database of the present invention;

5   Figure **9** illustrates a method for registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention; and

Figure **10** illustrates a system and method for catalog display and

10   maintenance.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Figure 2 illustrates a method **200** for providing a rebate in a business-to-
5   business network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the
present invention. As an option, the present invention may be implemented for a
business-to-customer framework, or any other business model. Further, the rebate
may take any form including, but not limited to a cash rebate. It should be noted
that other value items such as coupons, discounts, or any other entities of value
10   might also be provided.

Initially, in operation **202**, at least one order is received from a first user
utilizing a network. In one embodiment, the first user may take the form of a
merchant, or retailer. It should be noted, however, that the first user may include
15   any other type of desired party. Further, the order may be for any product or service
desired. In various embodiments, the order may be received by way of an electronic
message, an update on a website, or any other transmission mechanism over the
network. The network may or may not include the Internet.

20   Thereafter, in operation **204**, the at least one order is transmitted to a second
user utilizing the network. In one embodiment, the second user may take the form
of a vendor, or manufacturer. It should be noted, however, that the second user may
include any other type of desired party. The order may be transmitted by any means
similar to that by which the order was received.
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As indicated in operation **206**, the second user is further charged a first
predetermined amount based on the at least one order. Such first predetermined
amount may take any form including, but not limited to a percentage, flat fee,
graduate fee, or any other value that is calculated as a function of the order(s). The
30   first user is then paid a second predetermined amount in the form of a rebate. Note

operation **208**. In order to ensure positive revenue, the second predetermined amount is less than the first predetermined amount.

Figure **3** shows a representative hardware environment in which the foregoing method **200** may be carried out. The hardware of environment of Figure **3** may also be utilized by the first and second users in order to interface with the network-based framework. Such figure illustrates a typical hardware configuration of a workstation in accordance with a preferred embodiment having a central processing unit **310**, such as a microprocessor, and a number of other units interconnected via a system bus **312**.

The workstation shown in Figure **3** includes a Random Access Memory (RAM) **314**, Read Only Memory (ROM) **316**, an I/O adapter **318** for connecting peripheral devices such as disk storage units **320** to the bus **312**, a user interface adapter **322** for connecting a keyboard **324**, a mouse **326**, a speaker **328**, a microphone **332**, and/or other user interface devices such as a touch screen (not shown) to the bus **312**, communication adapter **334** for connecting the workstation to a communication network **335** (e.g., a data processing network) and a display adapter **236** for connecting the bus **312** to a display device **338**.

The workstation may have resident thereon an operating system such as the Microsoft Windows NT or Windows/95 Operating System (OS), the IBM OS/2 operating system, the MAC OS, or UNIX operating system. It will be appreciated that a preferred embodiment may also be implemented on platforms and operating systems other than those mentioned. A preferred embodiment may be written using JAVA, C, and/or C++ language, or other programming languages, along with an object oriented programming methodology. Object oriented programming (OOP) has become increasingly used to develop complex applications.

Figure **4** is a detailed flow diagram showing the various features of one embodiment of the present invention. It should be noted that the network-based system of the present invention may take any form including, but not limited to a web-site, a P2P network, a distributed catalog content system, or any other system

5   that is capable of carrying out the functionality set forth herein at least in part.

As shown in Figure **4**, a merchant, or retailer, may log in during operation **400**. Initially, the merchant is assigned a base rebate rate in operation **402**. Such rate may include a percentage of a total value, i.e. price, of a purchase order

10   submitted by the merchant. In the alternative, the rate may include any other fee structure that is based on the purchase order submitted by the merchant.

As an option, the rebate percentage rate may change based on an amount of purchase orders that are submitted by the merchant. In other words, the rebate

15   percentage rate may be selected based on a graduated scale governed by the value of a plurality of purchase orders. In the case where a merchant owns multiple stores, the rebate percentage rate may be based on the total value of purchase orders collectively made by the stores. In order to pay the above rebate percentage rates, the vendors may be charged another percentage rate that is greater than the rebate

20   percentage rate.

The rebate percentage rate paid to the merchants may also be increased if the merchant referred the vendor, or other retailers. This feature work s to increase the pool of vendors and retailers. Conversely, a ny vendor that refers a retailer may be

25   excused from the commission for purchases received from that retailer. In such case, the retailer may not get the rebate for the referring vendor, but t he rebate percentage rate may still be calculated based on purchases from that particular vendor, in accordance with the graduated scale.

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A sliding window may also be utilized in calculating the rebate percentage rate. In other words, the rebate percentage rate may be selected based on the value of the orders taken within a predetermined amount of time. In one embodiment, such predetermined amount of time is 60 days for inducing merchants to place

5 orders timely. Equation 1 sets forth the formula associated with the rebate percentage rate, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

<u>Equation 1</u>

10 $$C_R = R[T \text{ in } [L]]\% + V \%, \text{ where:}$$

R = the rebate as a percentage defined in the look up table **L.**

L = the rebate-lookup table that defines the map between

15 the total purchase amount and rebate accrued (See Table 2).

T = the total amount in purchase orders within the sliding window, i.e. 60 days.

V = the discount generated for a vendor that has been

20 referred to by the merchant (applicable only for purchase order for that vendor).

As the merchant utilizes the present invention to submit purchase orders for various products from vendors, a current rebate rate and a total rebate amount are

25 calculated and made available for display. Note operations **404** and **406,** respectively. As an option, the total rebate amount may be differentiated from a total rebate approved to be cashed in operation **410.** While the total rebate amount may be calculated based on purchase orders placed, the total rebate approved to be cashed may be calculated based on approved purchase orders. Table 1 sets forth

30 various examples of statuses of approved purchase orders.

Table 1

Submitted	Merchant has completed online purchase order and submitted the request to said vendor
Received	Purchase order has been viewed by vendor
Accepted	Purchase order request has been accepted by vendor
Shipped	Purchase order has been completed and shipped to merchant by vendor.
Closed	by vendor
Partially Shipped	Vendor has shipped part of the order to merchant

Table 1a sets forth various examples of unapproved purchase orders.

Table 1a

o Any purchase order placed prior to a predetermined date;

o Purchase order declined by vendor; and

o Purchase order cancelled by merchant, vendor, or representative of the business-to-business framework.

In operation **408**, a value of purchase orders required to receive an increased percentage may be calculated based on the graduated scale, and subsequently displayed. This information may be conveyed utilizing any desired graphical user interface. Table 2 illustrates an exemplary graduated scale.

Table 2

Money Spent   Percentage of Savings

$0.00-999.00   =   3%
$1,000-2,499   =   4%
$2,500-4,999   =   5%
$5,000-9,999   =   6%
5              $10,000+   =   7%

Figure **5** shows one exemplary graphical user interface **500** for displaying a

current rebate rate **501,** a current rebate amount **502,** and the required money to be

spent **503** before receiving an incremental increase in the rebate rate based on a

10   graduated scale (See Table 2), in accordance with one embodiment of the present

invention. As mentioned earlier, such values are calculated in real-time as the

merchant purchases products using the searching capabilities **504,** display frames

506, and descriptions **508** provided by the present embodiment.

15   With continuing reference to Figure **4,** purchase orders and/or changes

thereto may be received from the merchants in operation **420.** Anytime changes are

made to a purchase order, statistics in databases are refreshed to track a status of the

purchase order using a "PO_STATUS" variable and any associated rebate using a

"PO_REBATE_STATUS" variable.

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When a purchase order is submitted by the merchant in operation **421**, the

PO_STATUS variable is assigned the with the status of "SUBMITTED", and the

PO_REBATE_STATUS variable is assigned with the status of "PENDING." Note

operations **422** and **424,** respectively. If at any time the merchant cancels the

25   purchase order in operation **426,** the PO_STATUS variable and the

PO_REBATE_STATUS variable are assigned with the status of "CANCELLED."

See operations **428** and **430.** In one embodiment, the purchase order may be

cancelled by the merchant only if the vendor has not received it.

30   Once the purchase order is received by the vendor in operation **432**, the

PO_STATUS variable is assigned with a "RECEIVED" status in operation **434.** It

is then determined in decision **436** as to whether the purchase order request is accepted or declined by the vendor.

If the purchase order is declined by the vendor in decision **436**, the
PO_STATUS variable is assigned with a "DECLINED" status in operation **438**. Thereafter, an electronic mail message is sent to the merchant for notification purposes. Note operation **440**. With the transmission of such message, the PO_REBATE_STATUS variable is assigned with the status of "DECLINED", as indicated by operation **442**. It should be noted that a comment field may be reserved for describing the nature of the declined statuses.

If, on the other hand, the purchase order is accepted by the vendor in decision **436**, the PO_STATUS variable is assigned with an "ACCEPTED" status in operation **444**. Thereafter, the vendor may ship the items in operation **446**, and the PO_STATUS variable is assigned with a "SHIPPED" status. See operation **448**.

At this point, the vendor is charged a first predetermined amount, i.e. 9% for commission in operation **450**. The receipt of such commission is tracked in operation **452**. Upon receipt of such commission in operation **454**, the appropriate rebate amount may be transmitted to the merchant in operation **456**. Ideally, the rebate is paid monthly, and only if it surpasses a predetermined amount (e.g. $25.00). The payment of rebates is also tracked, as indicated in operation **458**.

Figure **6** illustrates a graphical user interface **600** that conveys information regarding the status of purchase orders and rebates. As shown, displayed is a pending rebate **602** that is calculated in operation **406** of Figure **4**. As mentioned earlier, such pending rebate **602** is subject to approval based on the status of the associated purchase order(s).

Below the pending rebate **602** is an approved rebate **604** that is calculated in operation **410** of Figure **4**. Further displayed is a cashed rebate **606** that represents approved rebates **604** that have been redeemed, i.e. checks cashed. A total rebate amount **608** is also calculated and displayed which represents the sum of the pending rebate **602**, the approved rebate **604**, and the cashed rebate **606**.

With continuing reference to Figure **6**, a status of the pending rebates **602** is tracked in a list **610**. Each pending rebate **602** is tracked by a purchase identifier **612**. As shown, the current status **614** of the PO_STATUS variable is displayed next to each purchase identifier **612**. Also shown is the current status **616** of the PO_REBATE_STATUS variable. The associated rate **618** is also displayed along with the associated rebate amount **620**. Purchase order totals **622** are also shown.

Figure **7** illustrates an exemplary information page **700** explaining the various aspects of the rebate feature of the present invention. Such information page **700** aids merchants and vendors in utilizing the business-to-business framework of the present invention.

Figure **8** illustrates a method **800** for allowing a merchant to purchase goods and/or services from a vendor who is not registered in the database **422** of the present invention. This functionality allows the merchant to increase its volume-based rebate amount while attracting additional vendor users. As shown in Figure **8**, the merchant information undergoes various operations **802** which correspond with operations **402-406** set forth during reference to Figure **4**.

When a merchant attempts to purchase goods and/or services from a vendor who is not registered in the database **422**, he or she is provided with a blank purchase order in operation **804**. It is then determined whether the merchant has a catalog and information that are necessary for obtaining the goods and/or services

desired from the vendor. Note decision **806**. As an option, this decision may be decided by simply querying the vendor.

If it is determined in decision **806** that the vendor does not have the catalog
5   and information, the merchant may add the vendor to a list in the database **422**. See operation **805**. Using such list, the present invention is capable of transmitting a notification to the vendor. Such notification identifies goods and/or services desired by the merchant, thus giving the vendor an opportunity to respond with an offer to fulfill an order. Of course, the transmission of the notification may be accomplished
10 using any desired communication medium, i.e. utilizing email, fax, wireless delivery, satellite transmission, etc.

If, on the other hand, it is determined in decision **806** that the vendor does have the catalog and information, the merchant may complete the blank purchase
15 order. Thereafter, the completed purchase order may be submitted for inclusion in the database **422**. Note operation **808**. This may be accomplished using any desired communication medium, i.e. utilizing a network, etc.

Thus, if the merchant has the catalog information for the vendor who is not
20 yet registered, they may manually fill in the purchase order information including, but not limited to vendor contact information, product details, quantity requested, cost and/or terms. As will soon become apparent, such purchase order request may be eligible for the volume-based rebate should the vendor accept the terms of the purchase and register.
25

Upon receipt of the completed purchase order, a copy of such purchase order is sent to both the merchant and the vendor, as indicated in operation **810**. Again, this may be accomplished using any desired communication medium. In addition to the merchant and the vendor, such copy of the completed purchase order is also sent
30 to a manager or person overseeing the database **422** in operation **812**. This enables

such person to contact the vendor for registration purposes via e-mail, fax, telephone, etc. Note operation **814**.

At decision **816**, the vendor has the ability to register with the database **422**. If the vendor decides not to register, the merchant may add the vendor to the notification list in the database **422**. See operation **805**. If, however, the vendor decides to register in decision **816**, database **422** personnel may re-create the purchase order that was filled out by the merchant. See operation **818**. Registering may include receiving and storing contact and product information associated with the vendor, or any other information necessary for allowing the vendor to use the framework. Once registered, the vendor may include its products in the searchable database **422**, and the various graphical user interfaces. Note Figure **5**.

If the vendor accepts the recreated purchase order in operation **820**, the merchant is given credit by updating the various parameters in the database **422** that affect the new rebate amount. Note operation **822** of Figure **8**. Further, the vendor may ship the product in operation **824**. As set forth earlier, the vendor is billed a first percentage in operation **826**.

Figure **9** illustrates a method for registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. It should be noted that a merchant may use merchant catalog information for identifying an unregistered product and/or service of a vendor who is already registered and present in the database **422**. In particular, the retailer may add to their purchase order request such products that are not currently in the database **422**. This functionality further allows the merchant to increase its volume-based rebate amount.

As shown in Figure **9**, a technique **900** is provided for registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework. Initially, in operation

902, at least one order for goods or services may be received from a first user, i.e. merchant, utilizing a network. As set forth hereinabove, the goods or services are ordered from a second user, and are not registered with the network-based framework. By being unregistered, the goods or services are not available using the

5   framework **100**.

Thereafter, in operation **904**, the second user is notified of the order utilizing the network. Further, the second user is permitted to display information on the goods or services using the network-based framework in response to the notification.

10   See operation **906**. This may be accomplished by collecting information, i.e. pictures and/or specifications, on the goods or services for the purpose of displaying the same using the network-based framework **100**. This allows other users to immediately access information relating to the second user via the network. Such information may include contact information and/or information relating to goods or

15   services offered by the second user.

Figure **10** illustrates a system and method **1000** for catalog display and maintenance. As set forth hereinabove, the database may be created and maintained at least in part by participating vendors. This not only removes any potential for

20   data entry bottleneck, but it gives the vendors direct and immediate access and control over their own listings, 24 hours a day. As an option, various technologies may be employed to streamline this process even further, allowing direct automated synchronization between the database and whatever product database a vendor may already be using internally. To accomplish this, the information may be changed

25   into a predetermined format or the like using a common interface protocol.

As shown in Figure **10**, the dynamic distributed catalog management system **1000** may include a centralized content repository **1002** which includes contact and product information of various vendors. Interfacing with the centralized content

30   repository **1002** is a content synchronization manager **1001** which receives

information from any type of computing device, i.e. personal digital assistant **1004**, wireless device **1006**, personal computer **1008**, etc. Also included as a component of the dynamic distributed catalog management system **1000** is a distributed content aggregator **1010** which interfaces with the content synchronization manager **1001**

5   and computing devices for purposes that will be set forth hereinafter.

In use, the content synchronization manager **1001** allows vendors to manage their contact and product information without being connected to a network such as the Internet. This is accomplished by storing and maintaining the contact and

10   product information of each vendor in the centralized content repository **1002** and at least one of the computing devices. Maintenance may be carried out by synchronizing the contact and product information between the centralized content repository **1002** and the computing devices. This synchronization may be executed manually or automatically upon a connection being established between the

15   computing device(s) and the centralized content repository **1002** via a network such as the Internet.

Entire catalogs may thus be managed off-line on vendors' computing devices, at their own convenience, and without bandwidth limitations. The content

20   synchronization manager **1001** allows a vendor to "Instant sync" product information from the computing devices to the centralized content repository **1002** and vice-versa whenever the vendor is connected on-line.

As an option, software that affords the above functionality may be easy -to-

25   use, point-and-click, and freely downloadable, thus requiring no computer expertise for the vendor to use. It may also make it dramatically more efficient to upload large numbers of files complete with photographs directly into the centralized content repository **1002.** The system may also allow automatic importing of vendors' existing product data from MS EXCEL and many other standard database formats,

30   and provide easy field mapping.

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Optionally, the present embodiment may provide content management and synchronization support for vendors with electronic data interchange (EDI) catalogs. A distributed content aggregator **1010** may be adapted to aggregate content from

5   vendor's websites. This allows vendors to maintain their own sites and allow the present embodiment to serve as a collaborative hub without any restrictions on participating vendors.

While various embodiments have been described above, it should be

10   understood that they have been presented by way of example only, and not limitation. Thus, the breadth and scope of a preferred embodiment should not be limited by any of the above-described exemplary embodiments, but should be defined only in accordance with the following claims and their equivalents.

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